

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 41WASHINGTON POST
1 March 1986

Brutality Unsolved: The Bishop Mystery

AS RECEIVED

Report in Bethesda on a cold winter's day.

Brad Bishop was wandering in the zone astray.

He said I think I need a long holiday.

He said I think I need a long holiday.

He said I think I need a long holiday.

He said I think I need a long holiday.

He said I think I need a long holiday.

ambitious foreign service officer at the State Department, left work uncharacteristically early, complaining of a cold.

En route to his home in the Carderock Springs subdivision of Bethesda, Bishop detoured to Montgomery Mall,

bought a hammer and a five-gallon can at Sears, and filled the can with gasoline at the corner Texaco station.

What happened next is still officially a mystery, except that sometime later that night, Bishop's mother Lobelia, 68, his wife Annette, 37, and their pajama-clad sons Brad, 14, Brenton, 10, and Geoffrey, 5, were brutally beaten to death.

Bradford Bishop, tired of taking their guff.

Bradford Bishop, got a poker and showed them his stuff.

For he's nine years past 30, a most desperate man.

Killed his whole family, took off and ran.

Bishop, who is charged with the five murders, has been missing for the past decade.

"Time heals wounds," Annette Bishop's brother Robert Weis said the other day. "It had slipped my mind that it was 10 years."

"Has it been that long?" said Lauri Morrow, who lived across Lilystone Drive from the Bishops and, like many friends of the family, had trouble accepting the mass murder, much less that all-American Brad Bishop could have committed it.

Final disposition of the six estates—the five victims' and Bishop's—was resolved just a few months ago, which "has made it easier," Weis said. Before that, "every phone call or letter from a lawyer brought memories."

One complication was that police do not want Brad Bishop declared dead—there is no statute of limitations on murder—because investigators closest to the case maintain that Bishop, using his considerable language and intelligence skills, assumed a new identity and is alive, perhaps living abroad.

"We avoided that issue [of whether Bishop is dead or alive] without going to court," said Weis, who helped work out an agreement between his parents and Bishop's only heirs, a couple of cousins and a nephew of Bishop's mother.

The Bishop case is listed in the files of the Baltimore office of the FBI as "pending" but special agent Rosemary Vicini said there have been "no leads" in the last year. Montgomery Police Sgt. Harry Harner said "nobody is actively assigned" to the Bishop case, and "nothing terribly relevant" has come up in several years. "The only time we get any activity," Harner added, "is after a story runs."

For a while, the FBI and Montgomery County police were inundated with sightings of Bishop, the most detailed of which placed him in Stockholm and in Sorrento, Italy. But it has been more than six years since any report was taken seriously.

In the meantime, Bishop has become something of a cult figure—the inspiration for a novel ("The Dark Room," by Carolyn Banks), a TV movie and a folk song.

Into North Carolina, the drive took all night.

The killings went smoothly,

the timing just right.

Five battered bodies, a horrible sight.

He put 'em in ditches and packed the dirt tight.

Evidence indicates that the killer put the blood-spattered bodies in Bishop's maroon Chevrolet Malibu station wagon, covered them with blankets and managed to drive undetected along Interstate 95, through a series of tollbooths in Virginia, to North Carolina.

The bodies were discovered only because the killer, after digging a shallow grave in a swamp in eastern North Carolina, doused them with gasoline, ignited them and inadvertently sparked a forest fire that caught the attention of a fire tower operator.

But it was a week before their identities were known, because there had been no report of a crime at the Bishop residence: Friends and neighbors attributed the boys' absence from school to a spur-of-the-moment decision by the close-knit Bishop family to go on an end-of-winter ski trip.

The Maryland link to the bodies came when agents of the North Carolina Bureau of Identification traced a pitchfork found at the graves to the Poch hardware store in Potomac, a few miles from Bishop's home.

It was another two weeks before police had any lead to Bishop's escape—assuming, as official police documents charged, that he was the killer. That break came on March 18, when Bishop's bloodstained station wagon was found abandoned at a campsite in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, 400 miles west of where the bodies were dumped.

Evidence that the station wagon had been used to transport the bodies was convincing: The back floor was coated with drying blood; and blood-stained blankets, an ax and a shotgun were found on the floor, along with dog biscuits for Leo, the family retriever, who also disappeared.

In the glove compartment were maps of the southern states and an empty vial of Sereax, a drug similar to Valium—which, the FBI later learned, had been prescribed for Bishop by a psychiatrist he had been seeing.

Discovery of the car set off a massive manhunt in the half-million-acre park, with National Park Service rangers, FBI agents and state police from North Carolina and Tennessee questioning thousands of campers and park visitors. One theory—still believed by some—is that a distraught Bishop wandered into the park and became a victim of its famous brown bears.

As the story unfolded in the weeks that followed, details emerged about the the seemingly idyllic lives of Brad and Annette Bishop.

They had been high school sweethearts in Southern California—an all-American couple; he the handsome blond quarterback on the football team, she the auburn-haired cheerleader. They separated just long enough to earn college degrees, he at Yale, she at Berkeley, and were married upon graduation in 1959.

The new groom enlisted in the peacetime Army, was assigned to intelligence school and learned Serbo-Croatian. His first assignment was in Italy, where he carried out mundane intelligence missions such as translating Serbo-Croatian journals into English and listening to Yugoslav radio broadcasts. After being discharged from the Army, he earned a master's degree in Italian at the Verona campus of Middlebury College.

Years later, at Bethesda dinner parties, the athletic Bishop liked to tell his friends that the highlight of his spying career was infiltrating the Yugoslav Army ski team when it went on maneuvers in Italy.

Nonetheless, after the murders, the feeling persisted among some friends and coworkers that there might be a connection between Bishop's intelligence background and the inexplicable violence that wiped out

his family. Maybe there was more to his job at State, they suggested, than was revealed in the records, which showed a successful, if routine, climb up the diplomatic ladder.

With his fluency in two foreign languages and his intelligence experience, Bishop bypassed much of the grunt work of a budding foreign service officer, and won an early foreign assignment, to Ethiopia. Within a year he was promoted and transferred to Milan, where his language proficiency helped him win another quick promotion.

Then came a rotation to the States, which he used to earn a second master's—in African studies, at UCLA—after which he returned to Africa, to Botswana. By the time Bishop was rotated home again, Annette and Brad had three young sons and had been joined by Bishop's recently widowed mother.

Lobelia Bishop helped with the down payment on a split-level contemporary that reminded them of California. The Bishops melded easily into the middle-class community—Brad and Annette played mixed doubles in the neighborhood club tennis tournaments and took neighborhood children on camping and sking trips.

But at work, desk-bound for the first time in his career, Bishop was passed over for promotion—the first glitch in the storybook tale—which prompted him to confide to a colleague that he was depressed.

*At the Department of State he
was only a pawn.*

*His chances were fading, his
hopes were all gone.*

*His household was run by his
mom's iron hand.*

*Bradford was never a family
man.*

At home, his wife was taking advantage of a doting mother-in-law and the expanded horizons of the emerging women's movement to study art at the University of Maryland. Brad's career may have been stalled, but hers was blossoming.

Still, a temporary setback at work hardly seemed sufficient cause for the brutal and bizarre crime that shocked the diplomatic establishment.

*Now Bradford has gone to a
far distant shore.*

*He's left us behind him, he'll
murder no more.*

*But there's a little Brad
Bishop in me and in you.*

*For a man only does what he
knows he can do.*

The investigation that followed stripped away the privacy of the family, and the façade of the illusionary American dream. But a convincing motive remains elusive.

Police uncovered mild financial problems, familiar to most upwardly mobile families; Annette's dissatisfaction with the prospect of leaving her comfortable suburban surroundings for another foreign assignment; the dominant role of Bishop's mother; and Bishop's visits to a psychiatrist. But they found none of the stuff of a made-for-TV mini-series: no extramarital affairs, no hidden cache of money, no prearranged plan, no CIA plot. Nothing to explain what triggered that night of terror in Bethesda.

*Some day they'll find him,
down in old Mexico.*

*With Leo his retriever,
drinking Jose Cuervo.*

*Why did he do it, no one can
tell.*

*He traded his family for a
ticket to hell.*